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SUBJECT: UNDP Conference for Sudanese Women in Politics in Juba

11. (U) Summary: The first annual National Conference on Sudanese Women in Politics, held May 7 - 11, was convened at Juba University under the sponsorship of the Government of Southern Sudan's (GOSS) Ministry of Parliamentary Affairs (MPA) and the United Nations Development Program (UNDP). GOSS President Salva Kiir and others gathered to give opening remarks of support for the role of women in the reconstruction and development of Sudan and called for increased programming designed to address the marginalization of women, particularly in the South. End Summary.

12. (U) The conference was the first of its kind held in Southern Sudan since the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) and brought together over 600 diverse women from the north and south, Muslim and Christian, urban and rural, to address the lack of political participation by women in Sudan. First Lady of the Government of National Unity Fatima Bahir, and First Lady of the GOSS Mary Auen, wife of Salva Kiir, who seldom makes any public appearances, both addressed the participants. Themes in the conference's opening remarks included education for women and girls, female leadership in business and politics, the role of women as peacemakers, and addressing the female representation gap in the GOSS. In addition to Kiir and the two first ladies, remarks were made by the Dutch Minister of International Cooperation, Minister of Transport and Roads Rebecca Garang, Presidential Advisor on Gender and Human Rights Awut Deng, and Minister of Gender, Social Welfare and Religious Affairs Mary Kiden. The First Lady of South Africa was to have participated but sent her Gender Minister in her absence who spoke on the commonality of the struggle in South Africa and offered to share lessons learned. Throughout the four day conference, NGOs and civic leaders will hold seminars on the number of and positions held by women currently serving in the GNU and the GOSS, including three Sudan People's Liberation Movement (SPLM) representatives in the GNU, four female GOSS advisors to the President, three female GOSS commissioners, and 40 female GOSS parliamentarians. Kiir emphasized a point he had made earlier in the week to the GOSS Governors' Forum (septel) that women had to be accommodated in the GOSS at all levels and that he was putting men who were "sitting on women's seats" in government on notice that "their days were numbered." Kiir also lauded the impact of Southern Sudanese affirmative action on the rest of the nation, noting that the South appointed the first woman Under Secretary (Parliamentary Affairs) and was followed by the North. He also cited the lead of the South in appointing the first woman Parliamentary Speaker in Equatoria State.

14. (U) Much of the oratory at the conference addressed the need for serious dialogue on how to tackle societal and cultural factors weighing against the education and advancement of women. The Gender Minister urged women to become involved in the discussions on the electoral law to ensure their adequate representation in all government institutions.

15. (SBU) Comment: The kick off of this Women's Empowerment Conference was a mass celebration with dancing, singing, and fiery speeches designed to galvanize the women as they begin the serious deliberations on the need to quickly address ways to reach the "marginalized of the marginalized" as Kiir stated. The topics they hope to address - women's abject poverty and unemployment, the excessive childbirth mortality rates, illiteracy, and political exclusion of the over 60 percent of the population of Sudan who are female, with most of it in the South, are critical to the success of the CPA. The Conference also foreshadows the kind of alliances, or at least networking, that may be formed across race, religion and region in the run up to the 2009 elections. But we won't really know until after the singing stops. End comment.

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